Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian: Survey, Analysis, Enhancement

Marinella Arena
Angeliki Assimakopoulou
Daniele Colistra
Domenico Mediati
Yannis D. Varalis

Abstract

The paper presents some results of a research on the Byzantine religious architecture of Mount Kissavos, located close to the Aegean sea in Thessaly. Half of the sixteen churches analyzed and cataloged were surveyed using rapid methods; the other eight were surveyed with range-based and image-based digital instruments. Two of these are rock churches: the hermitage of San Panteleimon in Melivoia and the hermitage of San Anargyroi. The latter, subject of this essay, is located in a natural cavity on a steep rocky ridge and is divided into three connected spaces.
The environmental context is particularly suggestive, overlooking a green valley; there are also relevant wall paintings. All this makes the hermitage of San Anargyroi a unique place, which could be further enhanced with the aid of digital use tools (digital anastylosis, holographic projections, virtual visits in situ and remotely, etc.) useful to improve the usability of the monument and the dissemination of knowledge.

Keywords
Mural painting and decoration, Byzantine Hermitage, Thessaly, Rock Churches

Topics
Documenting



Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. Internal scan: flat view. Image by Marinella Arena, Daniele Colistra and Domenico Mediati.

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Research Methodology

The study of the Byzantine churches located on the slopes of Mount Kissavos (aka Mavrovouni or Ossa), located north of Larissa -Thessaly-, is part of a research dedicated to the religious architecture of oriental matrix spread in southern Italy, Greece and Turkey between the 9th and 16th century (fig. 01). The nature of the territory and its geographical position (on the route between the Balkan peninsula and Constantinople) have favored the settlement, since the 9th century, of numerous monastic communities. At the end of the 14th century, the region was hit by an economic and demographic crisis; one hundred years later, with the beginning of the Ottoman domination, the presence and activity of the monks was drastically reduced, leaving few traces. The recent tourist development of the area has favored the continuous discovery of monuments linked to that flourishing period, thanks to studies carried out mainly by archaeologists from the Superintendency of Larissa and the University of Thessaly. The great morphological and typological variety of the present examples has allowed us to consider the churches studied, even if numerically limited, sufficiently representative of the historical and cultural context. Among the 16 Byzantine churches located on the slopes of Mount Kissavos (fig. 02), eight of them have been surveyed with a rapid method, and eight in detail. Of the eight architectures chosen, two are rock hermitages; three are in a state of ruin and have three different types (cross, cross inscribed and hall with narthex); two have a small single nave; one has an atonite plan (in this typology, the rectangular spans to the north and south of the naos open into two semi-circular apses, giving the church the shape of a tetraconch) (fig. 03).



Fig. 01. Mount Kissavos and the presence of Byzantine churches between the 9th and 16th centuries. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera and Silvia Pontillo.

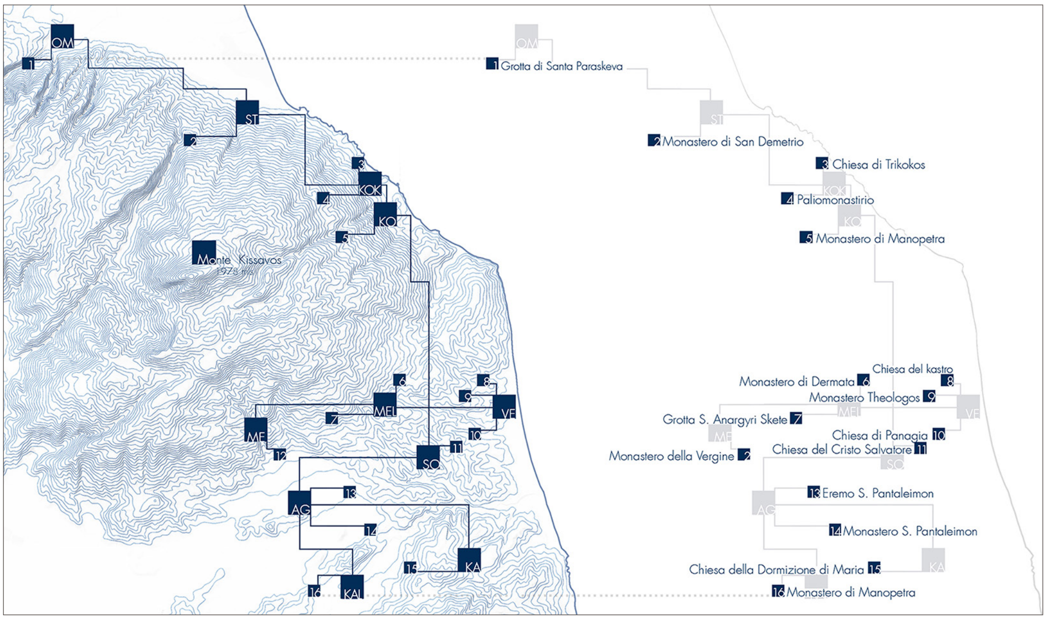


Fig. 02. ocation of the 16 architectures studied. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera and Silvia Pontillo.

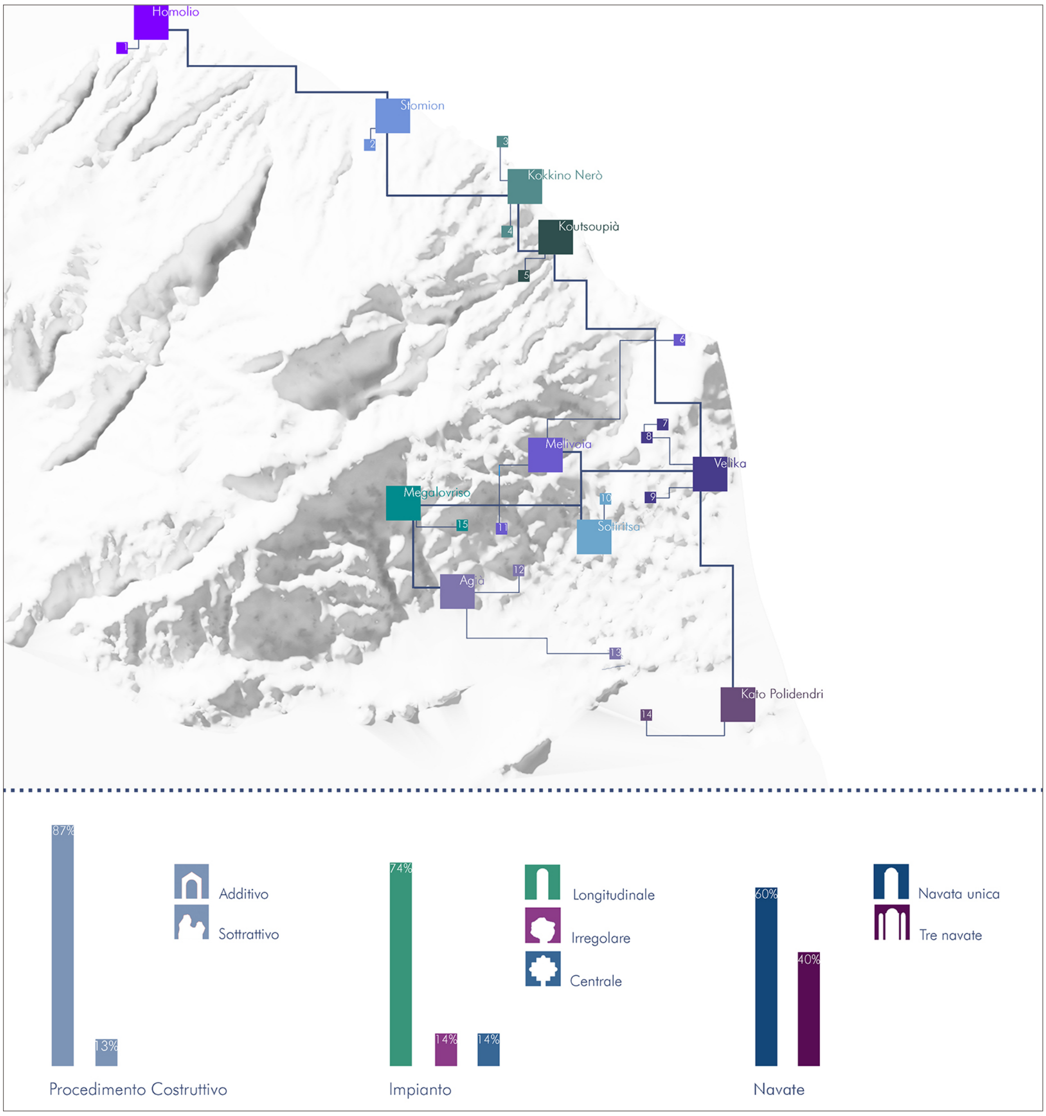


Fig. 03. Morpho-typological and constructive diagrams of the churches examined. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera and Silvia Pontillo.

The types present are:
- hermitages carved into the rock, such as San Anargyroi (13th century) and Panteleimon (13th century);
- the remains of churches, generally in a poor state of conservation, such as the Paleomonastyrus, with three apses, whose wall texture reveals the influence of the Constantinople school;
- small churches with a single nave, such as the Panagia in Velika and the churches in Polydendri.
The research methodology can be traced back, albeit schematically, to the following points:
- study of the context;
- cataloging of the 50 churches built in the Larissa region before 1453 (fall of Constantinople and end of the Eastern Roman Empire);
- on-site inspection;
- survey with mixed instrumental techniques (laser scanner and photogrammetry);
- graphic elaboration of the surveys and three-dimensional models in 1:50 scale;
- thematic in-depth studies on morphological, typological, constructive and iconographic and decorative aspects;
- cultural enhancement through applications based on new media (digital anastylosis, holographic projections, virtual visits in situ and remotely, etc.).
In this paper we will focus on the hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian, following a research method applied to all other monuments [1].

The Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi and its Wall-Paintings

The byzantine hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian, is located on the cliffs at the northwest edge of Mount Mavrovouni, near the road leading from Aghia to the Aegean coast. At the foot of the abrupt rock flows a stream that comes out of a narrow ravine with tall plane trees; just across, on the opposite plateau, a monastery was founded in 1588. John Koumoulides [2] was the first to have mentioned the existence of this hermitage and Nikos Nikonanos [Nikonanos 1973, p. 52; 1977a, p. 422; 1977b, p. 376; 1979, pp. 125-129] studied its architecture. The monks who inhabited originally the cave closed its entrance with a wall and divided the interior into three single-nave churches of unequal dimensions; the churches communicate with each other through arched openings. Poros and limestone roughly hewn blocks, mortar and bricks are used in the masonry, which presents an informal cloisonné technique [Nikonanos 1975, p. 126] (fig. 04).



Fig. 04. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. View of the entrance wall. Photo by Angeliki Assimakopoulou.

Each nave ends in a semicircular niche and the natural rock covers all spaces [3]. As there are no windows, the interior is quite dark. Air and light come exclusively from three doors opened in the entrance wall. A porch to the west is used today as a common narthex. A talented painter undertook the mural decoration of all three churches at the end of the twelfth century. Unfortunately, the dedicatory inscription above the west door of the central church is incomplete for the most part. The iconographic program follows the layout of a cross-in-a-square church with a dome, which, however, was not built due to the low height of the cave [4]. The sanctuary comprises symbolic scenes which emphasize the dogmas of the two natures of the Son of God and his divine incarnation – the Virgin Blachernitissa and Officiating bishops in the niche, the Annunciation and the Ancient of Days on the east wall – The walls of the nave are divided into zones that host the portraits of the four Evangelists and a few scenes of the story of Jesus – Nativity (fig. 05), Presentation to the Temple, Transfiguration and Lamentation –, as well as many individual portraits of military and monastic saints. The large-scale depiction of the Virgin Mary with Christ-child near the iconostasis reveals that the middle church was initially dedicated to the Mother of God (fig. 06) [5]. Similarly, paintings in the other two churches indicate that the north church was dedicated to Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian, and the south to Saint Onuphrius. At a later date, possibly during the last decades of the thirteenth century, the descending moisture from the rock may have been the reason for the renewal of the mural decoration of the roof of the central church. The rock-cut surface was divided into two unequal parts: the larger, to the east, was decorated with a representation that combines the Ascension and the Second Coming [6], while the narrower, to the west, bears a narrative depiction of the Crucifixion [7]. The mediocre art of this painter, who possibly was an amateur, seems to have depended upon old manuscript illuminations of the Komnenian era. After the desertion of the hermitage during the fourteenth century [Sdrolia 2013, p. 8], the south wall of the south church was repainted shortly after 1588, when the post-byzantine monastery was founded. The last murals' renovation took place in the first quarter of the seventeenth century on the occasion of a miracle performed by Saints Anargyroi, as attested by the painted inscription above the door to the north church. The fragmentary surviving paintings of the archangel Gabriel [8] and the Baptism of Christ [9] on the west wall connect the painter with the art and technique of well-known workshops from northwest Greece. Therefore, the monks that lead ascetic lives in this hermitage offered the resources to decorate it with murals at least four times, to the best of their ability. With the completion of the restoration works in the hermitage our knowledge on the mural painting of Eastern Thessaly will be significantly enriched.



Fig. 05. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. The Nativity of Christ. Photo by Angeliki Assimakopoulou.



Fig. 06. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. The Nativity of Christ. Photo by Angeliki Assimakopoulou.

The Survey, the Shape and the Context

Survey operations of the Hermitage of San Anargyroi were conducted in May 2016 using range-based instrumentations [10]. Spherical targets of radius 70 mm were used to align the scans. Point clouds were aligned and processed with Scene 5.5 software. The particular location of the hermitage, inserted in an extremely suggestive landscape, has required a careful integration between survey of the environmental context and rocky artifact one. For this purpose, 5 scans of the external space and 4 of the internal one have been processed (fig. 07). The individual scans were aligned, creating two separate groups ("internal" and "external"). The 'average tensions' in the "internal" group are 1.2222 mm; in the "external" group are 1.7298 mm.

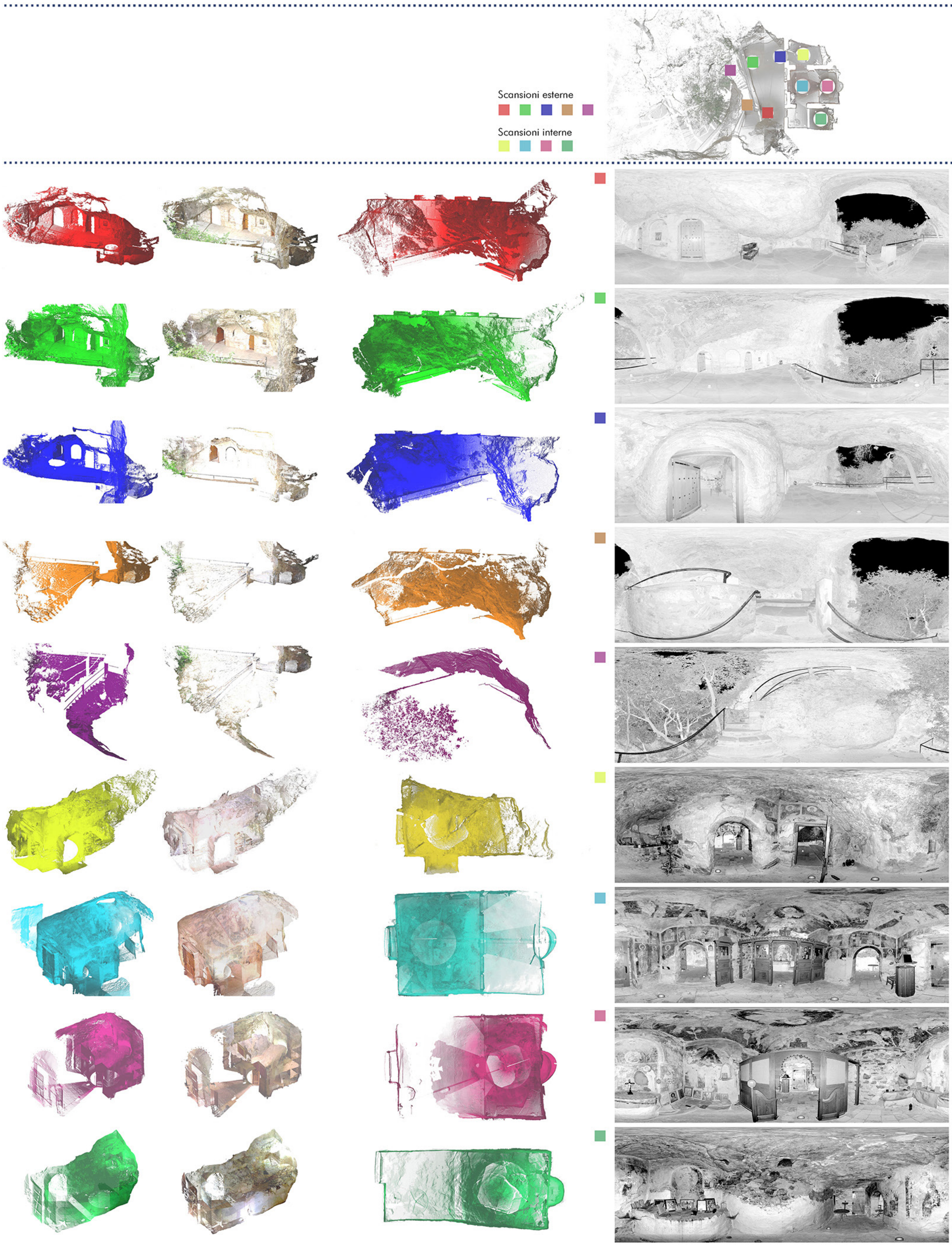


Fig. 07. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. Summary scheme of the laser scanner survey: 5 scans of the external space and 4 of the internal one. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera.

The ‘average tensions’ in the alignment between the two groups are 2.1011 mm. The church consists of three spaces, connected to each other, which open onto a small plateau with an irregular shape: a natural cove in the articulated rocky cliff. It can be accessed from the valley, through a steep and winding staircase. In this small widening three surveying positions were placed: two near the view to the valley; one near the access opening to the north compartment. Two other scans were made in correspondence of the last two landings of the staircase, in order to connect the plateau with the terminal part of the ramp. The hypogeal space exploits a pre-existing natural cavity. The interior and exterior are separated by a 65 cm thick wall of squared stone, on which there are three irregular arches and two niches (fig. 08). The interior is subdivided into three adjoining spaces by means of two transversal walls in natural stone about 55 cm thick. The three compartments were surveyed with four scans: two in the central space and one for each of the two adjoining ones. The northern space presents the most articulated conformation. It can be assimilated to an irregular trapezium whose maximum dimensions are 2.50 x 3.50 meters. On its right, through a round arch, we can access the middle room. It has a conformation similar to a rectangle of maximum dimensions 3.70 x 5.15 m. A wooden iconostasis 2.00 m high divides the room into two spaces with distinct functions: the faithful hall has a depth of about 2.90 m; the presbytery about 2.15 m (fig. 09). The presbytery area has two stone shelves on different heights. The left tabletop, which functions as an altar, is about 75 cm from the floor. It connects with the apse on the back wall – whose width is about 1.20 m – and with a small niche to its left.

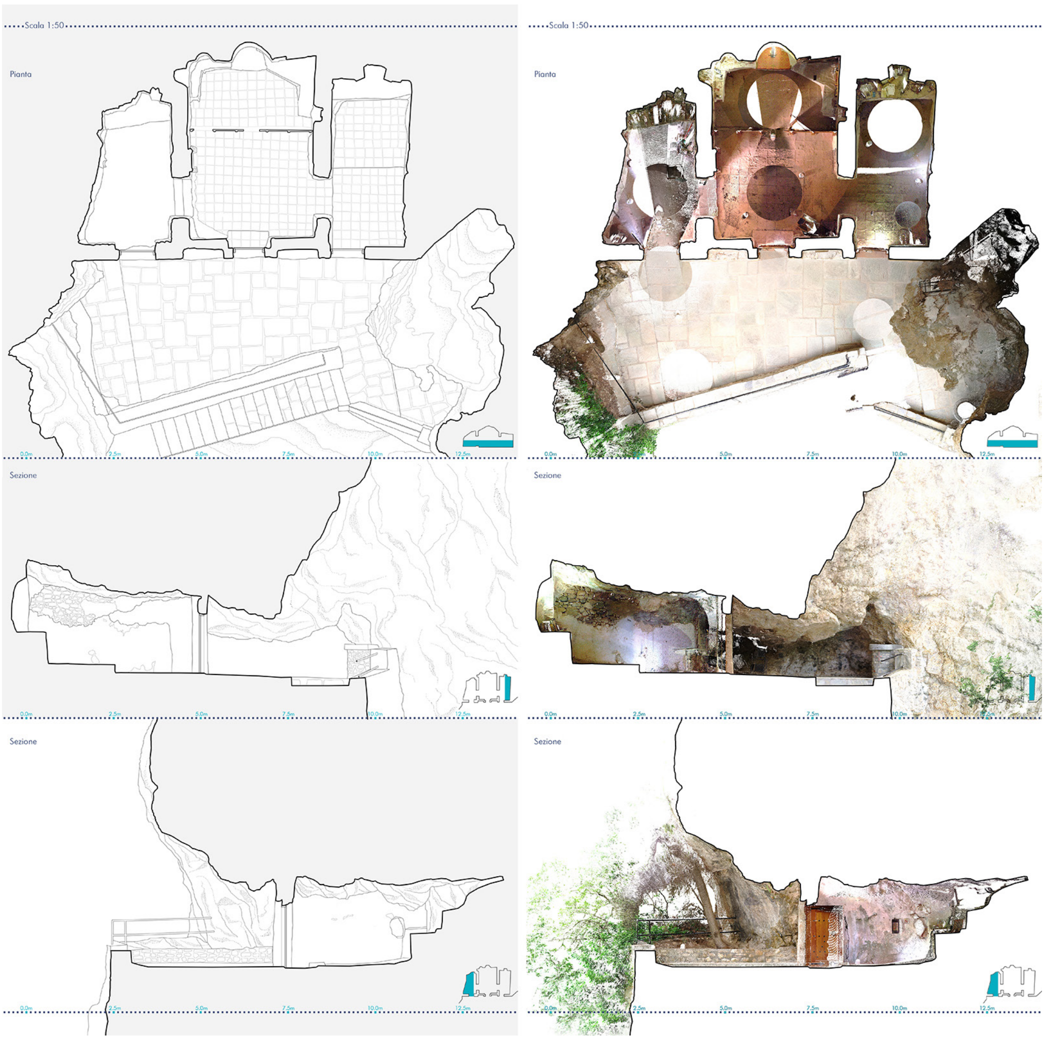


Fig. 08. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian.* Plan and section. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera.

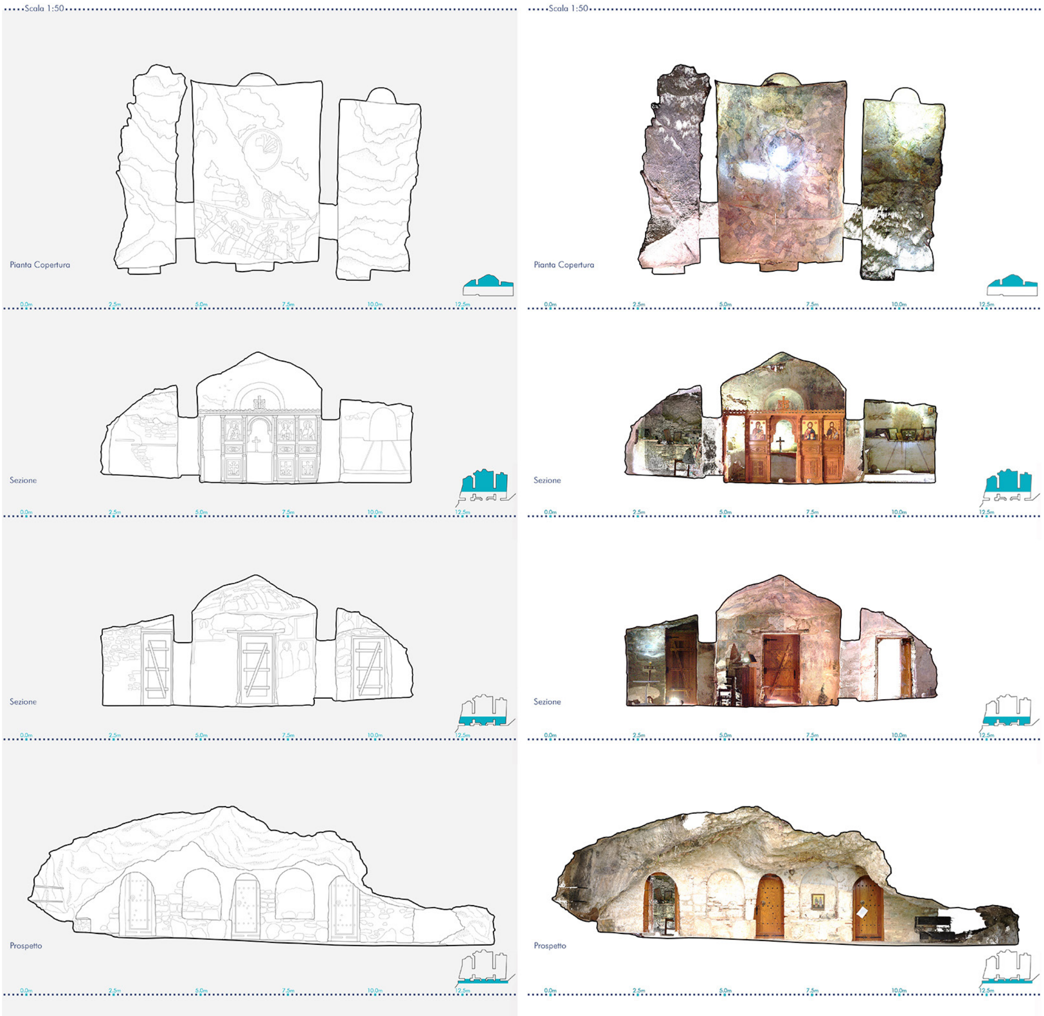


Fig. 09. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. Sections. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera.

The right tabletop is located at a lower level (about 30 cm from the ground) and could have the function of subsellia. The covering surface is a pseudo-dome with a very irregular shape and a maximum height of about 4.15 m (fig. 10). Also the last room, placed on the right, has a shape similar to a rectangle but with smaller dimensions (2.15 x 4.30 m). Here too, on the back wall, there is an apse – about 90 cm wide – that connects with a stone plane. The survey of the entire complex clearly shows the process of adaptation of a natural cavity to a hermitic and liturgical function, in which environmental context and minimal constructive interventions generate a perfect symbiosis that encourages the connection between material and spiritual dimensions.

Multimedia Valorization

Byzantine iconographic art is a complex phenomenon [11] that visually expresses the cultural and social influences of an Empire that has dominated the Mediterranean for centuries. The image of the divine, mediated by the rigor of orthodoxy and the custom of doing, reaches us incomplete: faded colors, the faces of the saints peeling off, the empty eye sockets. However, the material gaps are small compared to the conceptual and symbolic ones. The dialogue that these images made with the faithful has been interrupted: now few initiate know how to interpret the richness and complexity of the messages that the Byzantine frescoes preserve.



Fig. 10. Aghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. Orthogonal ceiling view and sections. Drawings by Mirko Cutrera.

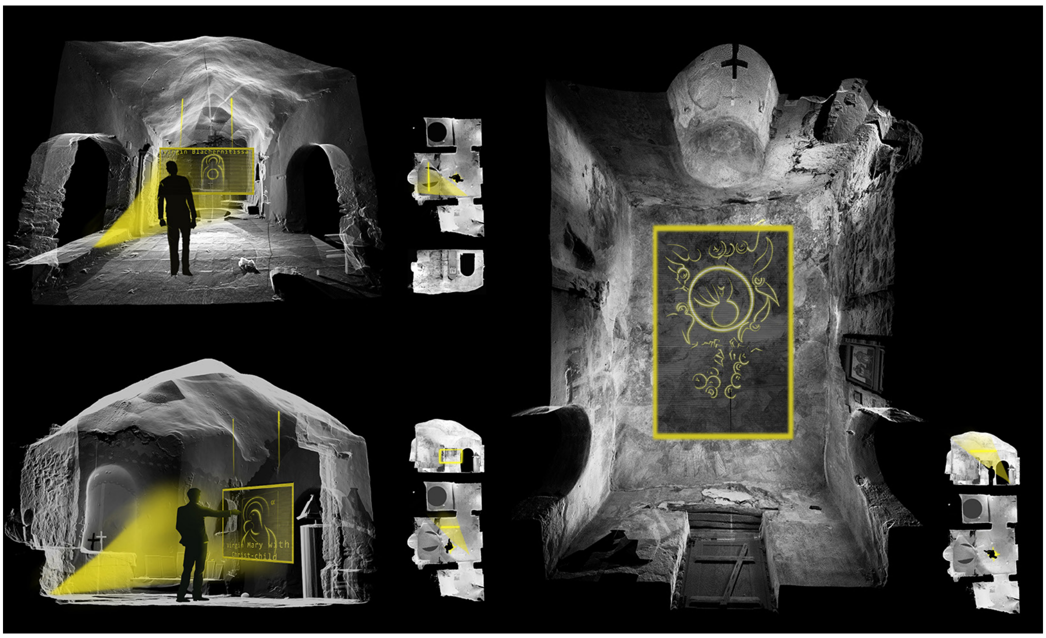


Fig. 11. AAghia, Thessaly, *Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi, Kosmas and Damian*. Hypothesis of hologram projections. Graphic elaboration by Marinella Arena.

The words of St. John Damascus, in this regard, are illuminating: "visible things are images of invisible and intangible things, on which they throw a faint of light" [St. Jon Damascene 2020, p. 12]. In the cave churches analyzed in this research, and especially in the case study illustrated here, the hypotheses of enhancement are aimed at re-establishing the dialogue between the visible component of the icons and the invisible, spiritual and historical one, which generated them. It has been assumed that multimedia tools are used, that are able to superimpose, for a short period of time, an explanatory image on the frescoes in the church (fig. 11). The system is based on a holographic projection process on film. Some thin and transparent screens are placed between the observer and the frescoes. The system indicates the optimal position for the observer and invites him to follow the story through the images already present in the iconographic apparatus of the church. The figure of the Ascension, of the Virgin Blachernitissa and of the Saints stand out against the dark background highlighted by luminous outlines projected on the holographic films. The present inscriptions are restored, highlighted and translated [12]. The viewing mode offered by holographic projections allows the simultaneous viewing of the holographic and analogue images and also allows the use of space, and additional information, in the dim light that characterizes the sacredness of all rock churches. The holographic projections are programmed with a precise timing that guides the observer inside the church. The sequence is activated a few minutes after the user enters, indicates the position for correct observation, underlines the figures present in the painting, offers a restored and translated version of the writings, plus a voiceover briefly tells the information necessary for a perfect understanding of the work.

Credits

The paper is the result of a common research. Daniele Colistra wrote the first paragraph (*Research Methodology*). Angeliki Assimakopoulou and Yannis D. Varalis elaborated the second paragraph (*The Hermitage of Saints Anargyroi and its Wall-Paintings*). Domenico Mediati wrote the third paragraph (*The Survey, the Shape and the Context*). Marinella Arena wrote the fourth paragraph (*Multimedia Valorization*).

Notes

[1] For further details, see Arena, Colistra, Mediati, 2019a, 2019b, 2020.

[2] Koumoulides 1973, 10-11, figs 56-63, plan III.9-10. See also Koumoulides, Walter 1975, p. 19, n. 6 and Koumoulides, Deriziotis 1985, p. 19.

[3] These are the characteristics of the third group of Nikonanos' classification of hermitages [1975, p. 123].

[4] For the arrangement of the iconographic program in cave churches, see among others Spieser 1991, p. 584.

[5] For the painting of the patron saint next to the iconostasis, see Tomekovic 1981, pp. 25-42; Koukiaris 1990, pp. 105-107.

[6] For the Ascension in the dome, see Demus 1964, pp. 19-20, 55; Panagiotidi 1974; Gkioles 1981, pp. 265-277 and 1990, pp. 84, 161-173.

[7] For the Crucifixion on the upper part of the west wall, see Mouriki 1985, p. 223.

[8] For the Archangels as protectors of the churches' doors, see Constantinides 1992, pp. 206-207; Semoglou 2000, pp. 88-89.

[9] The scene of the Baptism was transferred on the west wall, since there is no narthex [Cutler 1966, p. 82; Skawran 1982, p. 31; Ousterhout 1999, p. 14].

[10] The survey was carried out with a laser scanner Faro Focus X330 (UcRanging=0.496 mm).

[11] "At the present state of our knowledge we are unable to establish links between the preserved works of art and the Byzantine social structure or geography [...] some general facts reinforce this pessimistic attitude: the systematic anonymity of Byzantine works; the extreme scarcity of written sources following the destruction of almost all of the archives; finally, the insufficient differentiation of the works from each other" [Grabar 1964, pp. 27, 28].

[12] Byzantine frescoes are often accompanied by inscriptions. Some authors, such as Grotowski, trace this custom back to iconoclastic struggles: "The custom of identifying representations by means of an inscription intensified after 843 AD,16 but the above-mentioned earlier examples seem to prove the continuity between ancient and Byzantine Art. Statistically, inscribed works of art significantly grew in number in the mid-Byzantine period. For mostly literate Greek society this was the most secure way to establish a connection between a 'portrait' and the specified saint, or even to give depicted person a hallmark of sanctity. The text alone, though, did not suffice to create a relation of similarity between the icon and the prototype. In case of controversy, the text with the saint's name was, of course, always decisive. Nevertheless, artists had to create a more complicated system for the identification of saints without the help of words. In order to achieve this, they combined particular features of the saint's face and costume" [Grotowski 2010, pp. 136, 137].

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Authors
Marinella Arena, Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria, marinella.arena@unirc.it
Angeliki Assimakopoulou, University of Thessaly, aangie82@yahoo.gr
Daniele Colistra, Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria, daniele.colistra@unirc.it
Domenico Mediati, Università degli Studi Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria, marinella.arena@unirc.it
Yannis D. Varalis, University of Thessaly, iovaralis@uth.gr

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